

Peace dialogue, the Afghan case 2001–2014

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Introduction to the Afghan conflict

This chapter describes efforts undertaken since 2001, by the Afghan government and international political actors, to engage the Taliban movement in a dialogue about peace. The protagonists in this dialogue process understood that engagement with an armed opposition faction was unlikely to deliver progress unless it could be nested within a broader and more comprehensive peace process. Nevertheless, in the chapter the focus is exclusively on the Taliban dialogue – because of the movement's central role in violence during the period, and because so many key actors concentrated their efforts on this Taliban track.

The account below of Taliban peace dialogue experiences is selective, focusing on the most significant processes. Some dialogue processes were intended to be confidential. Others have been only partly documented, with few details available in the public domain. Some of the observations below, particularly with regard to Taliban responses to the dialogue experience, are based on the author's own experience as a practitioner. The intention is not to document every round of dialogue which occurred, but to identify the main challenges and lessons learnt from peace dialogue during the period.¹

The conflict in Afghanistan from December 2001 through 2014 pitted the Afghan Taliban against the US-led intervention force and the Afghan government that had been installed through the 2001 Bonn Accords. Afghanistan had already been at war for 23 years at the time of the US intervention. The Taliban insurgency subsumed multiple conflicts that had remained unsettled from previous

¹ This chapter is based upon the author's interviews with Taliban and other conflict actors conducted during the period 2001–2014, supplemented by documentation of dialogue processes and published commentaries on dialogue, reconciliation and the Taliban Movement.

phases of the war. The post-2001 conflict rapidly developed a distinctive geography. Most of the Taliban leadership moved to Pakistan, to re-organize their movement and its national structures there. After a brief hiatus in 2002, the Taliban launched armed resistance against the new authorities across the border in Afghanistan.

The Bonn Accords of December 2001 re-established government, with a road map for constitution-making and elections. The process was based on the assumption that the Taliban were no longer a force in politics, so no serious effort was made to involve them. However, after 2004 it became clear that the re-organized Taliban posed a significant security threat to the new order. Alongside its armed campaign, the movement developed an effective propaganda operation and projected a narrative of resistance against foreign occupation. Although the leadership had a narrow social base, the Taliban used the resistance narrative to project themselves as a national movement.

The Taliban movement was founded in 1994 on a platform of ending factional violence and introducing a Shariat-based system headed by the Taliban's *Emir*, Mullah Omar. The distinctive feature of the movement has been its cohesiveness, which proved critical in sustaining a protracted armed struggle against a militarily more powerful enemy. The robustness of the Taliban insurgency provided a rationale for the ratcheting up of the international military presence after 2004. It also inspired the idea in Kabul that peace and security were attainable only if the Taliban could be persuaded, through dialogue, to end the armed campaign. However, Taliban cohesiveness and the movement's broader organizational culture have helped to condition responses to that dialogue.

The evolving conflict and changing character of dialogue

An incident at the climax of the US invasion illustrated a form of dialogue across the frontlines which was to prove elusive in future years. In December 2001, as the Taliban were about to evacuate their stronghold Kandahar, the movement's deputy chief of staff, Mullah Abdul Ghani

Baradar, travelled incognito to rendezvous with Hamid Karzai and his column of anti-Taliban fighters at Shahwalikot. The parleys resulted in a decision that Baradar would summon much of the Taliban cabinet from Kandahar to agree on terms for integrating the movement into the new Afghanistan which Karzai was to head. The Taliban agreed to relinquish Kandahar without a fight. Karzai guaranteed the security and dignity of Taliban leaders, who would be free to return to their homes. The Shahwalikot parleys were one of those tantalizing moments that had the potential to transform the conflict, but in the event achieved little. Karzai soon abandoned the agreement, unable either to persuade his US allies to honour it or to rein in Afghan allies who had scores to settle. The few Taliban leaders who tried to reintegrate peacefully in their home areas were soon targeted by the new authorities or US forces. The USA tried to detain Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and encouraged the Pakistan authorities to do likewise on their side of the border – exactly the opposite of what had been decided in Shahwalikot. The episode provided a timely lesson of the perils of dialogue in the complex Afghan conflict. It was not hard for the Taliban top military commander to establish contact with his Afghan foe. But the inability of either side to speak for their allies rendered the agreement between the two Afghan parties basically irrelevant. What could be achieved through dialogue was conditioned by many aspects of a complex conflict environment and did not depend solely on the aptitude of the interlocutors.

In terms of intensity and the configuration of actors, the conflict passed through four stages after the initial US intervention. From 2002 to 2004 there was a *hiatus*. The Taliban insurgency had not emerged as a major security challenge, and violence was low (average 63 Western troops killed per year; civilian deaths were not systematically recorded). In the *early insurgency* 2005–2007, the Taliban generated rising violence by attacking the limited NATO deployment in their southern heartland and activating sufficient fronts elsewhere to give the appearance of a national campaign (average 184 Western troops killed and 1820 civilian deaths annually, after systematic monitoring started in 2006). The period of ‘*surge*’ was 2009–2011, when the USA doubled its troop numbers

and entered into direct confrontation with the Taliban (Western troops killed peaked at 599 and civilian deaths rose to 2774 annually). Finally, 2012–2014 was the period of ‘*transition*’, with a phased withdrawal of Western troops, while Taliban sustained their insurgency against both the Afghan government and the residual NATO forces. The annual number of Western troops killed fell sharply to 281 in 2012 and 2013, whereas annual civilian deaths rose further to 2863. Thus the conflict moved from low intensity to relatively high intensity, and from Taliban directly fighting Western forces to Taliban fighting Afghan forces supported by the USA and allies.

The policy of state actors engaging with the Taliban developed in parallel to this evolution of the conflict. In the early period 2002–2004, the Afghan government's National Security Council was sympathetic to the idea of reaching out to the Taliban. The first published framework legitimizing dealings with the Taliban came in 2005, when the government announced a combatant reintegration initiative, the ‘Strengthening Peace Programme’. Serious efforts to develop policy on engagement with the Taliban, with buy-in from the main state actors, came only from January 2010 onwards. As part of preparations for the London Conference on Afghanistan in that month, the Afghan National Security Council adopted a document proposing a new framework for understanding and dealing with the Taliban. Arguing that the majority of those active in the Taliban insurgency were potentially reconcilable, it proposed programmes to reintegrate low-ranking Taliban, as well as political outreach to woo senior figures. The London conference endorsed the idea of large-scale reintegration. During 2010 the Afghan government followed up by developing a new institutional infrastructure for peacemaking. The Obama administration also adopted a strategy of encouraging an understanding between the Taliban and the Afghan government, alongside the military surge which the US president had ordered from July 2009. Special envoy Richard Holbrooke helped develop the new engagement strategy. After Holbrooke's death, it was left to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in February 2011, to spell out the new US willingness to deal with the Taliban.

The policies of engagement with the Taliban that were developed in the decade up to 2014 did not focus specifically on ‘dialogue’. They advocated the pursuit of ‘reintegration’ and ‘reconciliation’—the latter in the sense of an envisaged political agreement that would allow the Taliban to end their conflict with the Kabul government. However, dialogue rapidly emerged as a key tool that all comers used in pursuing an understanding with the Taliban and eventual reintegration or reconciliation. Dialogue with the Taliban had become an established part of peacemaking practice in Afghanistan before 2009, but it was low on the Afghan government agenda and absent from the US agenda. Then, parallel to the military surge, as US and Afghan policies converged in favour of ‘reconciliation’ after January 2010, there came a new drive towards peace dialogue with the Taliban.

Multiple actors were involved in facilitating dialogue with the Taliban. The Kabul government was involved throughout, gradually becoming increasingly insistent on its prerogative to monopolize political outreach to the Taliban, justified by the mantra of ‘Afghan-led process’. Washington became involved in dialogue during the second half of the conflict, the phases of *surge* and *transition*. The range of actors involved in dialogue peaked in the third phase of the conflict, as did the Western troop presence. International civil society bodies organized dialogue events; the USA started to get involved, and the Afghan government raised the profile of its efforts.

Dialogue and reintegration in the early years – talking with Taliban 2002–2007

The new Afghan National Security Council (NSC) reached out to members of the Taliban, in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. The NSC and other Kabul-based actors sought dialogue with known members of the Taliban, many of whom had sought refuge in Pakistan, to discuss how they could reintegrate peacefully in the new set-up. Much of the dialogue in this period involved documenting Taliban grievances regarding arbitrary detentions, and harassment of their members by power-brokers allied to the new authorities. The earliest contacts pre-dated and attempted to pre-empt the insurgency. Field commanders, former Taliban officials and even some senior leaders were more

open to dialogue in this period than at later stages in the conflict – in part because it took time to re-establish leadership structures, and in part because Taliban harboured a residual hope that the international community might observe some neutrality between them and their Afghan rivals. This early dialogue produced some tangible results, like the decision by the senior Taliban figure from northern Helmand, Abdul Wahid alias Rais Baghran, to reintegrate. Dialogue commenced with a low-profile, informal format. Then, in 2005, the National Security Council launched a formal reintegration process, the Strengthening Peace Programme, headed by former President Mojadedi. This allowed the establishment of an infrastructure to screen and support Taliban personnel who opted out of the insurgency. The dialogue in this period helped improve understanding of the drivers of the nascent insurgency. However, the reintegration deal on offer was of scant interest to the movement as a whole, which saw it as tantamount to surrender. Neither was there political will in Kabul to address Taliban grievances, nor was the Taliban leadership willing to hold back from escalating its military campaign.

The flourishing of NGO and third-country dialogue initiatives 2008–2011

For approximately four years after 2007 there was a proliferation of initiatives to engage the Taliban in dialogue – several launched by international NGOs; others headed by individual political figures and hosted by Muslim countries in the region. The spreading Taliban insurgency persuaded many that a political settlement with the movement would be necessary to bring peace: simple reintegration deals would not be enough. In addition 2009 brought a new US administration, intent on focusing on the Afghan war and less averse to dealing with the Taliban than its predecessor had been. And well before the USA embraced the idea, President Karzai became an enthusiastic advocate of accommodation with the Taliban. By 2010 *The Guardian* noted twelve different channels of dialogue trying to engage the Taliban. Initiatives in this period included Qayyum Karzai's meetings in Saudi Arabia, the East West Institute's 'Abu Dhabi Process', a meeting in Maldives convened by Afghan political entrepreneur, Humayun Jarir, the son-in-law of Gulbadin

Hekmatyar, forums in Peshawar and Dubai held by the Pugwash Conferences and attempts by Humanitarian Dialogue to develop a negotiation channel with the Taliban leadership. The post-2007 initiatives tried to explore ideas of a political settlement involving the Taliban and to consider what sort of peace process might bring it about. The processes were convened in part or entirely in third countries – outside Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the organizers struggled to find a format in which currently serving Taliban could participate. Unconvincingly, it was frequently suggested that Taliban must be let off UN sanctions lists so that representatives could be able to travel to such events. Perhaps the high point of NGO efforts to use dialogue to catalyse a peace process with the Taliban was the Century Foundation Afghanistan–Pakistan task force. This was led by Lakhdar Brahimi and Thomas Pickering and eventually delivered a proposal for an international mediator.

Kabul's new peace infrastructure, 2010–2014

In line with the new NSC strategy and the decisions of the London Conference, during 2010 the government of Afghanistan launched a new institutional infrastructure for peacemaking. It convened over a thousand delegates in Kabul in June, as the National Consultative Peace Jirga. The gathering supported the idea of a new peace initiative and mandated the establishment of a 'High Peace Council' (HPC). Like the 2005 Strengthening Peace Programme, the HPC was to preside over another reintegration scheme. It also hoped to pursue the broader idea of 'reconciliation'. In fact, President Karzai preferred to task his closest aides, rather than the full HPC, with establishing direct contact with the Taliban. He confined the HPC to a more symbolic role, but through its existence was able to insist on exclusive Afghan (government) control over possible peacemaking. Although the HPC made little overall progress, it was charged with one interesting dialogue track – that with high-profile Taliban prisoners. In particular, Karzai prioritized attempts to access and dialogue with Mullah Baradar, who by then had been detained in Pakistan. The idea was that a senior member of the Taliban leadership, with a track record of engagement with Karzai, might carry sufficient influence with the rest of the movement to persuade them to negotiate and end the

insurgency. The Pakistan authorities allowed an HPC delegation to meet with Mullah Baradar but he was unwilling or unable to talk on behalf of the Taliban, and the process was aborted.

State-facilitated Track II dialogue in 2012 – the Taliban in Chantilly and Kyoto

Two state-sponsored Track II events in 2012 seemed to break the mould of previous dialogues, because senior serving Taliban officials participated in these publicly acknowledged events and even met with an aide to President Karzai. In June the Taliban sent former Planning Minister Qari Din Mohammad to participate in a colloquium in Kyoto. In December they sent a member of the Political Commission, Shahbuddin Dilawar, to a gathering in Chantilly which was also attended by political figures representing a range of Afghan interest groups and constituencies. The gatherings hinted that the Taliban had dropped their refusal to meet directly with the Afghan government. To their own constituency, the Taliban justified participation by saying they were simply explaining the policies of their Islamic Emirate. Din Mohammad read a prepared statement, and both he and Dilawar essentially reiterated the movement's rejection of the existing Afghan set-up, while remaining open to the possibility of letting other Afghans into a Taliban-led inclusive government after the departure of foreign troops. However, the Afghan government reacted negatively to the Kyoto–Chantilly experience: the Taliban delegations had become the main focus of attention, and the format deprived the government of its ability to speak authoritatively on behalf of Afghanistan. Instead of opening up the space for dialogue, these two events closed it down. The Afghan government made clear its objection to any further events other than those it might organize itself, and prevailed upon the UN to cancel a forum in Turkmenistan which would have been a follow-up to Chantilly.

Dialogue to set the scene for negotiations – Doha 2011–2014

The most sustained dialogue process which for a while seemed to offer hope of paving the way to negotiations was that associated with the Emirate of Qatar. The willingness of the Taliban to send

delegations to the 2012 events was a result of this ‘Qatar Process’. In the early stages, German diplomats brokered dialogue between Taliban representatives and US officials. This resulted in Washington encouraging Qatar to host a Taliban delegation. This delegation was staffed by members of the Taliban Political Commission – in effect, the movement’s ‘foreign ministry’. The Taliban announced that they were in contact with the USA, which marked a major departure for the movement. However, initial attempts to get agreement on a prisoner exchange, portrayed as a confidence-building measure, broke down, and the Taliban entered a period when they declined direct contacts with the USA. The presence of the Taliban delegation in Qatar meant that there was an ongoing opportunity for discreet dialogue, and the Qataris and non-US diplomats continued to engage with the delegation. The US side made a significant political investment in the process through 2013, culminating in June in the announcement of the opening of a formal Taliban office, and a carefully scripted Taliban declaration of intention to dialogue with Afghan and international parties. The publicly acknowledged process collapsed within a day, because the Kabul government objected to the profiling of the delegation as a quasi-embassy. However, the delegation from the Taliban’s Political Commission was able to stay on in Doha and continue its activities, without the platform of an office. After June 2013, members of the Political Commission met with Western diplomats and UN delegations, both in Doha and in the United Arab Emirates. The Taliban announced a break in talks with the USA, but continued to work to realize the originally envisaged prisoner release deal. Eventually in May 2014 the prisoner exchange, which had been on the agenda from the earliest stages of the Qatar Process, went ahead, but without any formal linkage to the anticipated broader political process.

Evolving understanding of the Taliban

The modest progress on dialogue came only after international actors had started to absorb an enhanced understanding of the Taliban Movement. At every stage along the way, gaps in the understanding by non-Taliban of the movement they were dealing with had hindered efforts to

launch dialogue. Especially significant misconceptions of the Taliban included the belief in 2002 that the movement would no longer be a factor in Afghan politics, the ignorance of the centralized nature of the Taliban organizational structure, underestimation of the importance of ideological motivation and loyalty to the movement, and the assumption that the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda were inextricably linked. Another aspect of the Taliban which architects of dialogue struggled with concerned the nature of linkages between the Taliban and the Pakistani security establishment – were Taliban really proxies, or did they enjoy a degree of autonomy? And, ultimately, could Pakistan, as President Karzai seemed to believe, ‘deliver’ the Taliban? The assumption that the Taliban were no longer relevant delayed the start of serious efforts to engage them. The failure to appreciate the cohesiveness of the movement and the importance of its ideology led to initial excessive reliance on individual reintegration programmes unsupported by any political dialogue. The assumption that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were ‘joined at the hip’ provided a deterrent to US support for dialogue, until Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden took a clear stance, recognizing the divergence of interest between the two movements and offering to engage with the Taliban if they made a clean break with their internationalist allies.

Poor understanding of the Taliban meant that those who wanted to promote dialogue underestimated the extent to which Taliban internal authoritarianism limited what could be achieved through conventional approaches. In consequence, it took a decade of experiments before internationally sponsored dialogue found a way of accommodating Taliban authoritarianism, by engaging with the movement’s Political Commission. Less progress was made on the alternative approach of circumventing this authoritarianism. That the early enthusiasts for engagement underestimated the extent to which the movement leadership was able to control external engagement is evidenced from the expectations they expressed about their dealings with the Taliban. As debate in Kabul moved towards the more political formulation of ‘reconciliation’ with the Taliban, supporters of this idea routinely expressed the hope that the Taliban would agree to talk on the precondition of

accepting the 2004 Afghan constitution. Once the Afghan government committed itself to pursuing 'reconciliation', in 2010, in the run-up to each event with reconciliation on the agenda, there was speculation whether a Taliban delegation would participate. The idea that senior Taliban, individually or as delegations, would consent to participate in processes choreographed by the powers they were fighting, or that they would give prior commitments which contradicted the movement's declared stands, flew in the face of well-established Taliban practice. Serving members of the movement were under central authority and would face severe consequences for unauthorized contact with the Afghan government or for contradicting the stance of the leadership.

The USA was able to make progress on dialogue when it appreciated, firstly, that the Taliban had a well-defined command structure, including specialized departments such as the political commission; and, secondly, that the good offices of a mutually trusted Muslim ruler could help access this structure. The sustained investment by the USA and Qatar in developing an official channel for engagement with the Taliban paid off, by providing a unique address for engagement with the Taliban leadership and allowing the US side to recover its prisoners of war. However, the structure of a single official channel reinforced the Taliban's authoritarian approach to controlling dialogue. The leadership gave their Political Commission in Qatar a restricted mandate, which meant that there were long periods in which dialogue was suspended. When meetings did take place, Taliban participants were largely in listening mode and simply promised to refer the issues to the leadership for consideration. The implicit recognition which the Qatar Process offered the Taliban did not cause them to rethink their armed struggle. But the necessity of protecting what they had started meant that as soon as the USA was engaged in Qatar it became reluctant to engage with other dialogue tracks. Those inside the Taliban movement who were critical of a hardliner leadership which controlled participation in the Qatar Process interpreted Washington's exclusive focus on Qatar as evidence that the hardliners had successfully co-opted the US side. The implication is that developing an official channel is worthwhile, but there is a case for

complementing it by retaining additional non-official dialogue channels.

Dissident dialogue – Mohtasim in Turkey and Dubai, 2014

Those inside the Taliban Movement who were privately critical of open-ended armed struggle but who were reluctant to break with the leadership remained marginal to the dialogue process. More effort would have been required in the choreography of dialogue to afford participation opportunities to movement loyalists who favoured a more conciliatory approach than the leadership was prepared to contemplate. In the absence of any such effort, Taliban pragmatists remained on the sidelines; any dialogue that took place after the launch of the Qatar Process was dominated by the hardliners or those obliged to speak on their behalf. The Century Foundation's task force provided an example of a format which was somewhat supportive of Taliban participation free from official restrictions. This process was based on consultations rather than a set-piece roundtable format. This meant that those leading the dialogue were able to have multiple points of contact with the Taliban rather than a single authorized channel. The format could also offer a degree of anonymity to interlocutors, who did not have to interact with each other.

On a more profound level, some Taliban pragmatists have argued that they can legitimize their participation in dialogue by obtaining a mandate from their peers and supporters. The rationale for this is that a collective which decides to send a representative to talk is less vulnerable to accusations of breaking ranks than an individual. However, a dialogue process that could provide scope for informal collectives to mandate participants would require significantly more preparation than one based on simply extending invitations to known individuals.

The one track based around Taliban pragmatists involved Mohtasim Agha Jan. Mohtasim was a senior Taliban leader who had served as Finance Minister in their government and after the reorganization of the movement had chaired the Political Commission. He was first associated with

dialogue when reported to have met the brother of the Afghan President, through Saudi good offices, in 2009. Mohtasim survived an assassination attempt in Karachi 2010 and ended up being offered refuge in Ankara. He then established a media profile for himself with a series of interviews in which he called on the Taliban to agree a political settlement and an end to the armed campaign. He profiled himself as a serving leader and loyalist of Mullah Omar, while condemning the violence conducted in Mullah Omar's name. In February 2014 the Afghan government briefed the media that an aide to the President, acting on behalf of the High Peace Council, had travelled to Dubai to meet with Taliban figures convened by Mohtasim. This was the high point of Mohtasim's dissident dialogue. He wanted to demonstrate to the rest of the movement that there was a viable alternative to armed struggle, an alternative which enjoyed some support among the Taliban. The Afghan government chose to publicize this. Soon, however, the dissident dialogue faltered, when Mohtasim was reported detained and deported. The UAE authorities considered that this now public and controversial dialogue initiative went beyond anything they had authorized or were prepared to tolerate on their territory. Although Taliban hardliners were clearly relieved at Mohtasim's predicament, his message that there was an alternative to armed struggle continued to challenge their narrative of the war.

The experience of engagement with a pragmatist demonstrated the potential of a 'dissident peace dialogue' complementary to the official track. Despite Mohtasim's claims to be a *bona fide* member of the leadership and a confidant of the supreme leader, he approached dialogue with the status of a dissident. He thus challenged the sole authority of his peers to talk on behalf of the movement and articulated ideas which they were reluctant to embrace but which had potential resonance with the base. Predictably, the official leadership responded to this element of subversion by refusing to share a platform with Mohtasim. Thus they only allowed their delegates to participate in the Chantilly platform on condition that Mohtasim not attend. They also tried to impose a social boycott, penalizing Taliban who had contact with Mohtasim. In a tough warning from the leadership

to its cadre to avoid flirting with the dissidents, a former Taliban minister with links to Mohtasim, Haji Raqeeb, was assassinated in Peshawar. However, arguably, this dissident dialogue challenged Taliban thinking about approaches to the armed struggle and peacemaking in a way that encounters stage-managed by the official leadership could not. Through his presence in the media, with a series of interviews, Mohtasim articulated the idea that the NATO commitment to troop withdrawal meant that the Taliban movement should make the transition to non-violent struggle for Islamist reform and participation in a pluralist Afghanistan. Therefore, when the media reported the dialogue between Mohtasim's Taliban and the Afghan government, the official leadership could be in little doubt regarding Mohtasim's line in the dialogue – he had already spelled it out publicly. However, from January 2013 onwards, Washington remained single-mindedly focused on developing and protecting its official dialogue track with the Taliban through Qatar. So as to avoid jeopardizing this track, the USA avoided encouraging Mohtasim's dissident peace dialogue. As President Karzai had already been largely successful in killing off civil society or UN-led dialogue, the result of the US focus on the official track was that there were few opportunities in which Mohtasim or other pragmatic Taliban members could articulate their pro-peace ideas. Nevertheless, the limited experience of dissident peace dialogue suggests that it can provide one way of building support for the idea of accommodation and escaping the controls on debate imposed by an authoritarian organization. But such dialogue requires platforms and sponsors, separate from the official track, whose participants may find the dissident dialogue challenging.

Sustaining dialogue

The Afghan experience illustrates the challenge of the long and elastic timetable. The current phase of the Afghan conflict went on for eight years before there was top-level national and international political will to invest in dialogue. There was some continuity on the Afghan side during this period, as key figures within both the Afghan government and the Taliban movement remained engaged throughout. However, turnover was rapid in all senior international positions – UN mission chiefs,

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commanders and US Special Representatives. It was not even obvious who within the international community had lead responsibility for dialogue or for sustaining the relationships with Taliban figures in periods when high-level dialogue was not on the agenda. None of the actors who at various times tried to promote peace dialogue managed to make the kind of investment in relationships of trust with Taliban interlocutors that might have sensitized the process to Taliban concerns or increased the Taliban's confidence in participating. That task was well beyond the reach of conventional diplomacy.

Assessing dialogue outcomes

The overriding strategic objective for the various parties who launched dialogue with the Taliban was to end the violent conflict by persuading the movement to halt its insurgency on the basis of an accommodation with the government in Kabul. Instead, the Taliban sustained their insurgency throughout the decade of international intervention in Afghanistan, until 2014. Both the Afghan government and Western proponents of dialogue hoped for a political process within the lifetime of the intervention up to 2014. However, dialogue did not bring about peace within this timeframe, and thus can be judged a strategic failure.

On the other hand, dialogue with the Taliban can be credited with more modest success, contributing to the foundations of a longer-term peace process and mitigating some of the effects of the ongoing conflict. Engagement with the Taliban through Doha at least provided an address for the movement's official leadership. This address was available for future initiatives to engage with those running the insurgency, and marked an advance from the earlier situation when there had been considerable uncertainty regarding the standing of various interlocutors who claimed to talk on behalf of the Taliban. The Doha channel also built Taliban confidence in the utility of engagement, by virtue of the June 2014 prisoner release.

Dialogue contributed to a tentative sense that there was scope for accommodation between the Taliban and the order in Kabul. But sense of possibility did not lead to any groundswell on either side to realize the hope. Proponents of the armed struggle on the Taliban side and those opposed to accommodation on the government side may actually have been alarmed by the prospect of progress. Direct encounters between senior serving Taliban and Kabul political figures, as in Chantilly, provided opportunities for them to be exposed to each other's perspectives. However, there was little evidence of the emergence of any common understanding as to a mutually agreeable political roadmap. In this sense, dialogue symbolized the possibility of cooperation – without contributing much to the evolution of ideas about what a resolution might look like.

The activities of Taliban pragmatists, most notably Mohtasim Agha Jan, made a different contribution by showcasing what can be characterized as a Taliban rhetoric of peace – a set of arguments that affirm the previous struggles of the Taliban but call for an early end to the armed struggle. This peace rhetoric challenged the orthodox Taliban view that the armed struggle was the only way to achieve the ideal of a more Islamic Afghanistan. On the other hand, the publicity given to dialogue between Taliban allies of Mohtasim and the Afghan government symbolized for the official Taliban leadership the risk of the movement splitting, or ultimately of pragmatists negotiating some kind of peace deal without them. In the absence of substantive progress towards defining a settlement this at least generated pressure for deal-making.

The modest gains achieved in mitigating the effects of conflict include sensitizing the Taliban to issues concerning civilian casualties. Although the UN continued to report a high proportion of civilian deaths caused by the Taliban, the movement did eventually establish a commission to monitor civilian casualties. Over time, the movement seemed to show greater awareness of the adverse consequences of civilian casualties and of the need to exercise restraint over its fighting forces.

As to the negative consequences of dialogue, international actors, the Afghan government and the Taliban all harboured fears about the risks associated with participating in dialogue. All those fears proved exaggerated, however, and none of the actors faced serious adverse consequences arising from dialogue. Reservations held by the main international actors about venturing into peace dialogue were that this would compromise their stance against terrorism, or could undermine the authority of their ally, the Afghan government. The Afghan government shared the fear that dialogue with the Taliban would undermine its authority. It worried that the arrival of the Afghan Taliban at talks could lower the status of the government to a *primus inter pares*, and felt that its international allies did not take this risk seriously enough. The Taliban were concerned that participation in talks would be taken as recognition of the Afghan government, and that this would expose the movement's leadership to accusations of capitulation, delegitimizing it within pro-jihad constituencies and undermining its capacity to sustain the armed struggle. The fact that the Afghan government presided over a decade of dialogue efforts and then completed its term in May 2014 with no evidence of loss of authority or of conceding legitimacy to the Taliban suggests that international and Kabul fears were overblown. The only episode in which the legitimacy issue came to a head was during the controversy surrounding the Taliban's move to raise a flag in their representative office in Qatar in June 2013. However, a pragmatic solution ultimately allowed a Taliban delegation to operate in Qatar, without a publicly visible office. Meanwhile, in the three years after acknowledging a move towards participating in dialogue, the Taliban leadership retained its grip on the movement, sustained its armed struggle and did not face any significant defections or splits. The only indication that the leadership face adverse consequences from the move to dialogue came in 2014 when a maverick commander and his grouping, the Fidayi Mahaz, said they objected to the Taliban's engagement in the Qatar Process. However, the leadership's ability to claim credit for securing the release of Taliban leaders from Guantanamo Bay helped them maintain support for engagement, despite the opportunistic threats from these anti-dialogue extremists. Indeed, the

paucity of adverse consequences from dialogue indicates that the protagonists could have safely embraced dialogue earlier and gone further.

Factors determining dialogue outcomes

How the nature of the Taliban movement constrained dialogue outcomes

The Afghan Taliban Movement has a strong authoritarian tradition, and this affected the nature of dialogue with the movement and its members throughout the 2001–2014 period. The Taliban's organizational practices have severely limited the scope for informal dialogue to engage its decisionmakers in any meaningful way. The movement operates with a highly centralized model in which all authority flows from the Amir or supreme leader. Notionally, all significant appointments are made by the Amir. But Mullah Omar's inaccessibility since 2001 means that appointments have been centralized in the hands of his *naib*, or deputy. The leadership has insisted that it must authorize any political contact with non-Taliban entities – particularly the Afghan government and foreign powers or NGOs linked to foreign powers. The leadership has only rarely authorized envoys to engage in contacts, and has periodically taken the trouble to issue public denials of reported Taliban participation in dialogue processes.

The Taliban restriction of external contacts goes far beyond the kind of conservatism that other media-shy organizations practise. The authoritarian tradition has allowed almost no scope for internal debate on political issues or questioning of the leadership's conduct of the armed struggle. Speaking privately, Taliban members frequently mention how they fear persecution or at least loss of privileges if they question the leadership's strategy. There is almost no scope even for internal dialogue on sensitive issues such as alternatives to armed struggle. Furthermore, several issues relevant to peacemaking are virtually taboo: these include the sacred status of armed *jihad*, the treachery inherent in any Taliban member having contact with foreigners or government officials, and the status of Mullah Omar as a rightly guided leader. Unless in the company of close and

trusted friends, few Taliban dare address these taboos, although any dialogue intended to explore ways for the Taliban to exit armed conflict could legitimately touch on all of them. In any case, few members active within the movement dare to defy the official bar on external contacts, irrespective of the subject for discussion.

The key doctrine underpinning Taliban cliquish authoritarianism is ‘obedience to the Amir’, according to which members of the movement means unquestioningly accepting the orders of the supreme leader and the officials under him. In the context of the post-2001 armed struggle, the implicit contract facing members of the Taliban has involved the obligation to defer to the leadership on all issues and maintain secrecy, in return for which they receive status and resources. This contract has limited the choices for anyone seeking to organize a dialogue with the Taliban. If you opt for an officially authorized Taliban participant, you will probably end up with an empty seat, as the leadership accepts few invitations. If you opt for someone thought to be close to the movement but not currently holding an official position, this raises questions of the extent of his access and influence – can he authoritatively speak to Taliban positions, or relay results of the dialogue back to serving members of the movement? The hyper-centralization of decisionmaking is designed to insulate the movement from the kind of informal influences through which Track II dialogue can sometimes impact official positions. Some serving officials of the movement choose to conduct unauthorized external contacts anonymously, simply by hiding such participation from the leadership. However, the steps required to preserve confidentiality create numerous other problems in the dialogue process, including the difficulty of holding plenary sessions.

While the movement's authoritarian approach to internal organization has limited who might participate in dialogue, the leadership's war strategy has dictated what the Taliban can say. The spirit of the Shahwalikot moment – an openness to dealing with the new order in Afghanistan – seems to have lasted through 2002 at most, allowing even senior figures such as Taliban Foreign Minister

Mutawakil to try to initiate dialogue. Thereafter the leadership opted for re-organization and armed struggle to assert the legitimacy of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. Consistent with this, they disavowed contact with Kabul, which they dubbed a puppet government, and became highly restrictive in their approach to dialogue with anyone else. When, after almost a decade of armed struggle, the Taliban acknowledged that they had opened dialogue with the United States, the leadership announced to members that a 'political front' was required, to complement the military front. Members were told that the Taliban could gain international recognition through participation in dialogue, commensurate with what they had achieved on the battlefield. Parallel to the strategic goal of achieving recognition for their Islamic Emirate, Taliban leaders have remained focused on more tactical objectives, in particular the release of prisoners and fund-raising. They have been prepared to contemplate participation in dialogue if there were prospects of achieving these objectives. During the early stages of the Qatar Process, the Taliban successfully put prisoner releases on the agenda. Indeed a principal way in which the Taliban have gauged the utility of any potential dialogue track has been the prospect of achieving releases through it.

Throughout the post-2001 insurgency the Taliban leadership has been based in Pakistan. This has been an added complicating factor for any dialogue process. The Taliban's continued access to this 'safe haven' has been critical to the success of their armed struggle, so they have been reluctant to do anything that might jeopardize their presence in Pakistan. They live and operate 'semi-covertly', avoiding public exposure like media appearances or official meetings. The Pakistan authorities have tried to maintain a degree of deniability regarding the Taliban presence. The attitudes of the Taliban and the host country alike have essentially ruled out Pakistan as a venue for dialogue. Even participants in a process which enjoyed Pakistani official sanction and participation, the Afghanistan–Pakistan Regional Peace Jirga in 2007 and 2008, found themselves unable to access any Taliban leaders in Pakistan. The politics of the safe haven combined with the Taliban antipathy to appearing to deal with the Kabul government have shaped the geography of dialogue and forced

facilitators to look to third-country venues.

‘Quality control’ in participant selection has proven a recurrent challenge in Taliban dialogue. This factor has been greatly exacerbated by the Taliban official reticence, the requirements of anonymity or confidentiality and the Taliban inaccessibility in Pakistan. Attempts at dialogue have been plagued by impostors, charlatans and minor figures who simply exaggerate their importance. The two most famous examples of dialogue impostors were the ‘fake Mansoor’, a man posing as Mullah Omar's deputy, whom NATO reportedly helped to meet President Karzai in 2010; and the suicide bomber who killed High Peace Council chairman, Burhanuddin Rabbani, in 2011. In both cases, the impostors exploited the scarcity value of Taliban interlocutors (the government side was so keen to find senior Taliban willing to talk that they did not conduct due diligence checks) and the willingness of the government to maintain initial confidentiality. More generally, in a dialogue process involving people associated with the Taliban who do not actually claim to be current officials, it is difficult to assess the extent of their authoritativeness and influence. This ambiguity even applies to well-known and respected figures who held high office in the Taliban administration up to 2001, such as former Foreign Minister Mutawakil and former ambassador to Pakistan, Salaam Zaeef. After their release from periods of incarceration they have been based in Kabul and have therefore not had any formal association with the movement during the period of the insurgency. Although these figures have contributed important ideas to previous rounds of dialogue, they are at pains to clarify that they cannot speak on behalf of the current leadership. The Taliban's cultivated inaccessibility and imperviousness to external influence create a moral hazard problem. The easier it is for a Taliban-related figure to participate in dialogue, then the less likely it is that he is connected to current Taliban leadership thinking.

The Taliban's authoritarian practices do not only restrict direct participation in dialogue, they severely restrict the flow of ideas and help keep the leadership insulated from attempts to influence

them. Although veterans of the movement occasionally participate in dialogue, they are highly circumspect in feeding ideas from the dialogue back into the movement. They tend to avoid acknowledging having participated in dialogue, and in movement circles they are reluctant to challenge taboos or question the leadership. The leadership has predominantly developed its strategy without reference to the base. This lack of consultation is reinforced by the device of the inaccessible but unchallengeable Amir. The ‘visible’ leadership attributes key decisions, such as that of launching the Doha process, to this personage. But even fairly senior members of the movement wishing to question decisions or strategy cannot approach him, and they dare say little in front of his lieutenants. The movement has two national-level organs which ostensibly deal in ideas – the Cultural Commission and the Council of Religious Scholars. However neither of these is able to influence leadership strategy or initiate debate. They are politically subordinate to the Amir and his lieutenants, and function as propagandists and legitimizing tools, supporting the strategy of armed struggle ordained by the leadership. This imperviousness means that although Taliban dialogue participants may offer useful insights into thinking within the movement and even suggest helpful actions by the other parties, they have limited opportunities for sharing with their leadership any insights they may have gained in the dialogue. The authoritarian organization and insulation of the leadership also enable the movement to sustain hypocrisy beyond the level possible for an organization subject to more internal or external accountability. During the insurgency the Taliban have excelled at exaggerating military achievements and downplaying their forces' role in civilian casualties, while representing their fight as being against foreign forces and barely acknowledging that Taliban fighters mainly fought against Afghans. Getting past Taliban official and counterfactual descriptions of the situation on the ground is a major dialogue challenge.

Alongside the structural and organizational barriers, the leadership's commitment to sustained armed struggle constitutes the most fundamental Taliban barrier to dialogue. The leadership has prioritized the armed struggle over any form of political activity, generally holding back from

authorizing dialogue for fear of undermining the armed struggle.

Afghan government stance and its impact on dialogue outcomes

A rather different set of challenges arose from the attitude of the government of Afghanistan to dialogue. From an early stage in the conflict, Kabul showed itself prepared to engage in dialogue with members of the Taliban, and the government's 2010 reconciliation policy provided a formal endorsement of engagement with the movement. In practice, however, government support for dialogue was both conditional and opportunistic. Meanwhile, government actions directly undermined some of the dialogue initiatives.

The Afghan government repeatedly publicized claims of contacts with Taliban intermediaries, indicating that this heralded progress towards political agreement. The publicity covered *bona fide* contacts, as when government sources leaked news of the early stages of the US dialogue with the Taliban in the Qatar Process, as well as contacts of doubtful significance with figures who lacked a mandate to talk for the Taliban. The government pursued two objectives in this drive to publicize erstwhile discreet dialogue. Firstly the government sought to legitimize itself by demonstrating that the Taliban were prepared to deal with it, despite their public assertion to the contrary, and indicating that the government had the capacity to preside over a peace deal. Secondly the government sought to assert a monopoly over dialogue with the Taliban. It publicized dialogue knowing fully that this would embarrass those involved, principally the Taliban, who sought to achieve progress in discrete talks before preparing their constituencies to accept that dialogue was necessary. The government proved unwilling to concede the space to other actors for peace dialogue with the Taliban, irrespective of whether those pursuing the dialogue were state or non-state actors and whether the dialogue was formal or informal.

In addition to essentially spoiling those efforts at dialogue which it did not directly control, the

Afghan government also invested in high-profile events and structures, which it portrayed as a peace process, but which did not include contacts with influential Taliban or substantive dialogue. Confronted with slow progress towards dialogue with the leaders of the Taliban movement, the government was content to pursue the theatre of a peace process. It publicized claims that groups of Taliban fighters had reintegrated peacefully and accepted government authority. It accorded much fanfare to the deliberations of the 2010 ‘national consultative peace *jirga*’ and then of the ‘High Peace Council’ – which resolved to pursue peace but consisted entirely of figures who were already stakeholders in the Kabul-based political order.

In the process the government created tactical and strategic obstacles to any peace dialogue that might have included the Taliban. Potential Taliban participants feared that confidentiality would be compromised; dialogue facilitators feared government sanctions. More strategically, the spectacle of government sponsorship of what they considered to be fake peace processes led pro-peace Taliban to question whether the Kabul government could ever be trusted as an interlocutor.

International actors and dialogue outcome

As to international actors, their investment in dialogue in the period 2001–2014 was minuscule in comparison to their investment in the military campaign. Despite the eventual US decision to embrace dialogue, within the overall scheme of the decade plus intervention, dialogue with the Taliban was a low priority in which Washington and its allies were little involved.

The position of the USA and allies with regard to peace dialogue was also coloured by their role as protagonists in the post–2001 conflict. In the first place, the original ideas of the ‘war on terror’, with the Taliban cast as terrorists even if not unambiguously listed as a terrorist organization, made Western governments cautious about engaging with them. This also added a slightly exotic quality to the idea of ‘talking with the Taliban’ when dialogue finally found its way onto the agenda. The

position of the US allies as protagonists also meant that they were committed to supporting the government in Kabul: they could not engage the Taliban as neutral parties. Furthermore the USA and allies committed to the idea of an Afghan-led approach to peacemaking, which meant that they were reluctant to pursue independent contacts or dialogue without the blessing of Kabul. Finally, the status of the USA as a protagonist and the chief financier of the government in Kabul acted as a barrier to it accepting a role as international mediator. A striking feature of the dialogue experience between 2001 and 2014 is the lack of international mediation.

The inability of the international community and the Afghan President to come up with a common approach to peace dialogue constrained progress almost as much as did Taliban authoritarianism. The collapse of UN efforts to convene a forum in Turkmenistan, the paucity of civil society organized dialogue events after Chantilly and the hiatus in the Qatar Process after June 2013 all show how the sensitivities of the Afghan government severely restricted the scope for dialogue. Once the Afghan President had decided that engagement with the Taliban which his government did not control risked undermining government authority, it is not clear that there was any formula available which could have won Kabul's blessing for continued dialogue. This shows how protagonists to a conflict are apt to politicize and seek to control the dialogue process. Therefore the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), dependent as it was on maintaining a working relationship with the Kabul government for the rest of its business, found itself at a disadvantage in trying to facilitate a peace dialogue. Cooperation with the Kabul government would have been the best basis for facilitating dialogue. But in the absence of cooperation, autonomy would have sufficed. Unable to muster cooperation or autonomy, UNAMA had to lower the profile of its dialogue efforts.

How approaches to facilitation affected outcomes

The Afghanistan dialogue experience also highlighted the importance of location. Those wishing to

pursue dialogue never had access to an ideal location, and this compounded the challenges inherent in the nature of the conflict and of the conflict actors. An ideal location would have been one that was secure, accessible, supportive and reputation-enhancing for all participants. The latter point was particularly important for Taliban participants in dialogue. Rather than being concerned solely about the practicalities of whether they could safely reach a dialogue venue, they repeatedly expressed concern about how travelling to different venues could affect their reputation among peers. In simplest terms, travel to Western countries would open Taliban to accusations of selling out, whereas their reputation would be enhanced by visiting Saudi Arabia and other conservative Sunni Muslim countries. Qatar provided a brilliant illustration of what it meant to have a supportive host, as the Emir, in consultation with officials in Washington, made support to the Taliban delegation in Qatar a foreign policy priority. This meant that the Qatar Process and the Taliban based there had the blessing of the ruler, with access to visas, protocol, accommodation, meeting venues, publicity where appropriate, confidentiality when appropriate – and all this for an open-ended duration in a secure, stable environment. The fact of being hosted and patronized by a respected Muslim leader, plus all the trappings which came with this process, legitimized the Taliban's participation in the Qatar Process and enabled the leadership to overcome any residual misgivings about the risk of sell-out or compromising the *jihad*. What Qatar provided to the official Taliban delegation can offer a template for the ideal location for Afghan peace dialogue. However, US concerns about protecting its official channel with the Taliban meant that once the Qatar Process got going there was little prospect of Qatar hosting a broader peace dialogue accessible to anyone but representatives of the official Taliban leadership. Unofficial processes, by operating low-profile, were able to find alternative venues in the Gulf. However, the security and legal sensitivities arising from the 'war on terror' meant that any host government could quite reasonably expect to exercise a veto on dialogue with Islamist militants on its territory. If the international community or the Afghan government had taken a strategic decision to pursue dialogue with Taliban, they would have had to make the diplomatic investment of preparing a long-term venue for that dialogue in a friendly Muslim state.

The aim would have been to encourage and facilitate participants from different parts of the Taliban movement and their non-Taliban interlocutors at least as well as the Emirate of Qatar facilitated its guests.

There was a continuing tension between participants' desire for confidentiality while engaging across the frontlines and the desire of Afghan officials either to achieve propaganda gains or sabotage the process by publicizing dialogue processes. With the exception of a handful of showcase events, confidentiality remained key to Taliban participation, both official and unofficial. Although the Qatar Process reached a point (briefly) where Taliban participants were prepared to face the media and issue statements and interviews, in both the earlier stages and when talks resumed after the debacle of the office-opening, the Taliban side expected confidentiality. This concern for confidentiality around engagement, even when contacts were properly authorized by the leadership, was partly motivated by the latter's need to manage expectations within the movement, but also because the leadership expected opposition to its role in dialogue, from Kabul as well as from the Pakistan authorities. The concerns for confidentiality of Taliban figures who contemplated participating in dialogue in an unofficial capacity or without the blessing of the leadership went far beyond the concerns of Taliban-authorized interlocutors. They believed that their personal security would be compromised if their participation was made public, so Taliban participation in events was frequently conditioned upon the hosts agreeing to maintain confidentiality.

The contribution of civil society to the strategic-level peace dialogue process was modest and short-lived. The hostility of the Afghan government, the impenetrability of the Taliban, and security concerns around engagement with militant Islamists all acted as deterrents to engagement on the part of civil society. For a period, civil-society organizations like the Pugwash Conferences circumvented the challenges by organizing peace dialogues with Afghans drawn from many interest groups but not serving the Taliban. Former Taliban leaders who were resident in Kabul, most

prominently Mullahs Zaeef and Mutawakil, received invitations to roundtables because they were assumed to be authoritative voices regarding Taliban perspectives and were also able to travel relatively freely. Mediation organizations such as Humanitarian Dialogue did try to develop dialogue channels which involved currently serving Taliban and accessed those actually running the insurgency. However, the notable developments in dialogue up to 2014 – Qatar, Chantilly and Kyoto – all involved significant state backing and no autonomous civil-society action. That part of Afghan peace dialogue that involved real Taliban proved a difficult environment for civil society to operate in.

Conclusions

Set against the overall massive costs of the war, the (admittedly modest) achievements from a decade of Afghan peace dialogue efforts suggest that pursuing engagement was justified. However, the Afghan experience also indicates numerous lessons learnt and ways in which the dialogue process could have been strengthened. Those who promoted dialogue failed to take adequate account of the nature of the Taliban as an organization. They were also slow to reconcile the competing imperatives of the main parties to the conflict – the desire of the Afghan government to control dialogue processes versus the desire of the Taliban movement to keep its distance from the government. Similarly, no actor succeeded in using relationships cultivated during the low-key dialogue of the early years to enhance the dialogue when it became a higher political priority in the later phases of the conflict.

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